

Dealing with Human Remains

An Approach from the Northern Marianas

Over the past two decades, the Northern Mariana Islands have developed into a prosperous resort destination catering to hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly. Necessary components of this development have been the construction of resort facilities such as hotels, golf courses and commercial buildings, and a significant expansion of the islands' infrastructure to support a rapidly growing population comprising foreign guest workers and local residents.

In accordance with Commonwealth and federal statutes, earthmoving projects are reviewed by the Division of Historic Preservation (HPO) to determine their potential effects on archeological, cultural and historic sites. In cases where significant sites are identified, priority is given to *in situ* preservation, or, where this is impractical, to implementing appropriate mitigation of impact measures which often take the form of archeological data recovery.

Particularly sensitive are sites that contain human skeletal remains ranging from ancient Chamorro burials to Japanese casualties of World War II. Ancient remains are most commonly

found in former village sites that were usually situated in coastal beach environments.¹ Also present in coastal areas are individual and mass graves of Japanese military personnel and civilians killed during the World War II battles for Saipan and Tinian, and a much smaller number of 19th-century burials associated with abandoned historic cemeteries. Today, these same coastal areas are highly sought after sites for commercial development as well as the logical rights-of-way for the islands' ever-expanding infrastructure system, a combination of factors ensuring that human remains are encountered on a routine basis.

Finding human remains is relatively easy, but determining what to do with them has proved to be a more difficult task. Should they be left in place, excavated by archeologists and subjected to rigorous scientific study, moved to a safe location and reburied without study, or simply ignored? What parties should be consulted? Should all classes of human remains be treated in the same fashion?

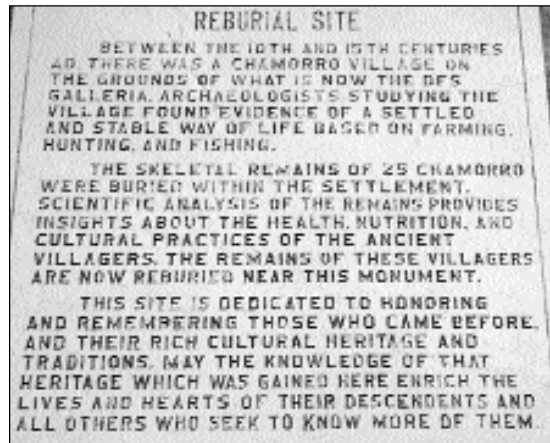
Opinions on these questions vary. Developers, both in the public and private sectors, along with landowners hoping to secure lucrative lease agreements, commonly view human remains as impediments which either threaten their planned projects or make them more costly. The scientific community, primarily composed of professional archeologists, tends to look upon human remains as important sources of data about ancient life that should be recovered and studied as thoroughly as possible. Views of other members of the public range from indifference to a strong belief that human remains are sacred and should be left undisturbed and unstudied. Adding to the mix is the official policy of the Japanese government that calls for the recovery and repatriation of its war dead.

As the agency legally mandated to protect the Commonwealth's historic resources, the HPO had the responsibility to take into consideration these various viewpoints and to develop a coherent policy for the treatment of human remains.

A latte and interpretive plaque mark a reburial site on Saipan. Photo by the author.



A typical interpretive marker at a reburial site. Photo by the author.



Public hearings were held on Saipan, Tinian, and Rota during which an important point emerged: while a majority of people wished to see human remains left undisturbed whenever practical, they did not want their *in situ* preservation to interfere with important public and private sector projects, particularly those supporting the economic vitality of the community and those that involved the provision of essential infrastructure services.

Taking into account these comments, the HPO issued “Standards for the Treatment of Human Remains” which were formally adopted by the CNMI Historic Preservation Review Board in October 1999. These standards establish four classes of remains—Ancient Chamorro, Historic, World War II, and Modern—with priority treatments for each class.

In accordance with the standards, ancient Chamorro remains, the most commonly encountered class, are to be left *in situ* whenever practical with special effort directed to modifying construction and earthmoving plans to avoid disturbance. When this is not possible, ancient remains are to be carefully excavated under professional archeological supervision and, where appropriate, subjected to specialized osteological study with the aim of expanding our knowledge about ancient life. Once analysis is completed, the standards call for the remains to be reinterred in a secure area as closely as possible to the original grave site. In some cases, reburial sites are marked with cultural objects such as latte stones and basalt grinders and provided with information about ancient life gleaned from the archeological investigations.²

Historic remains are also to be left *in situ* whenever possible. When necessary, historic remains are recovered by professionally supervised archeological excavations that include basic osteological field analyses. In cases where the

remains are of Carolinian origin, they are turned over to the Office of Carolinian Affairs for final disposition.³ In cases where the remains are determined to be Chamorro, they are turned over to the Catholic church for reinterment at an appropriate cemetery.

World War II remains comprising Japanese war dead, are the second most commonly encountered class. In accordance with an agreement between the Japanese government and the HPO, these remains are to be collected whenever they are discovered, subjected to basic in-field analyses and stored in a specially designated container. Special attention is focused on recovering personal effects that will aid in the identification of individual remains so that any surviving family members may be notified. Once a year, these remains are to be turned over to representatives of the Ministry of Health and Welfare for cremation and subsequent repatriation to Japan.

In rare instances where modern remains are encountered, the standards call for coordination with the Departments of Public Health and Public Safety for appropriate investigation and disposition. In one recent instance, the HPO was asked to examine two human skeletons that turned out to be the apparent victims of a homicide.

Finally, the standards require the HPO to seek the repatriation of human remains from the Northern Marianas that are held in museum collections around the world. It was a commonly held sentiment that long-term museum curation is not an appropriate or acceptable treatment and that such remains should be returned to the islands for reburial.

It is hoped that these standards will allow for a flexible and balanced response in cases where human remains are encountered, one that takes into account a widespread desire for modern development while at the same time addressing the traditional respect for the dead that is still an important element of local society.

Notes

- ¹ Chamorro human remains are most commonly associated with the Latte Phase which began roughly 1000 AD.
- ² *Latte* are a two-piece foundation stone that supported Chamorro residences late in prehistoric times. It is now an important cultural symbol.
- ³ Carolinian burials may be identified by the presence of elaborate glass bead necklaces.

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